

Chapter 11.

Under the leadership and guidance of the R.N. Cruiser "Kent" the six vessels of our convoy moved slowly northward from Cape Town and soon began to feel the rising temperature of the tropics. The slowest steamer in the convoy and which set our pace was the "Ayrshire". At night now we were travelling without lights each ship trying to keep station behind the next ahead by steering on a dim, shaded blue light at the stern. The old "Ayrshire" seemed always to make poor time at night with the result, when daylight came in next morning, "Ayrshire" was often well astern and sometimes out of sight. We had no alternative to slowing down until "Ayrshire" could again take station.

My boyhood life at various lighthouses on the Victorian coast had given me a good practical grounding in visual signalling and this our Captain soon discovered. Often I would be called out to exchange signals with our escort or with another ship in the convoy. As will be seen later my ability in visual signalling brought me much pleasure.

Our next port of call was Freetown, Sierra Leone, on the west coast of Africa where we spent a few hours one fine Sunday afternoon to replenish our fresh water. There was no shore leave but it was pleasant to relax in the safety of the harbour for a few hours. Mail was sent ashore here but no mail came aboard which was a disappointment to many in our ship.

Northward bound again and soon the tropics were left behind and the cold of the northern hemisphere settled upon us. Two days out from Plymouth six small destroyers met us and escorted us singly to port. The "Osterly" arrived first followed a few hours later by ourselves and almost simultaneously the "Galway Castle" each with troops to put ashore. The remaining ships of the convoy went on to other ports. We soon had unloaded our human cargo and left Plymouth as the sun was setting. As we passed her we could see that "Galway Castle" was making ready also to put to sea.

The run up from Plymouth to Tilbury Docks on the river Thames was right in the danger zone and where we could expect a submarine attack or run down a floating mine. Extra lookouts were posted day and night. So far I had not heard a S.O.S. distress call although the senior radio officer had heard one from a steamer out in the Atlantic ocean two nights earlier.

The second radio officer had taken ill as we approached Plymouth with the result that the senior man and myself had to keep two 6-hours watch each day. We mutually agreed that we would ^{be} six on and six off and change at 2am and 8am. I had but taken over my watch at 2am on the morning after leaving Plymouth when, obviously quite close to us because of the strong signals, a steamer made a S.O.S. call and announced that she had struck a mine and was sinking. This was the "Galway Castle" that came out of Plymouth almost on our heels. It was not our job, in the circumstances, to go to the aid of the sinking ship; that was a job for vessels set aside for the purpose. We went on our way hoping there were no mines on our track. Soon after daylight next morning, however, we were stopped by a mine sweeper while a mine was exploded by gun fire right where we would have been within a few more minutes but for the sharp lookout on the mine sweeper.

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Saturday morning we tied up in Tilbury Dock and almost immediately every member of the crew bar one was on his way ashore; the ship was virtually deserted excepting for a watchman, and the very junior wireless officer who had no home to go to and no friends to visit. That was not all. Partly through inexperience and partly through stupidity I had not collected any wages in advance from the Purser and had nothing in reserve. From that Saturday morning until lunch time Monday I did not eat. In retrospect it is difficult to imagine a lad of 17 years of age who would spend two days without food and be so foolish as not to tell his worries to the old watchman. Of course there was then rather strict rationing of food but, if one had money, it was always possible to buy food of some kind; money however was a problem. My pay amounted to thirty shillings per week and as we had been 8 weeks en route from Sydney my available balance was £12 which had to keep me in food and accommodation, with a little left over for sight seeing during the month we spent tied up at Tilbury.

fy The third class train fare to London and return was 5/4d. Somehow I managed a couple of trips to London each week and there walked many miles seeing, I believe, many parts of London quite unfamiliar to many who have lived there throughout their lives. I saw Buckingham Palace; I saw Green Park and paid a penny to sit on a chair and watch the birds, and the people going by; I saw in various uniforms soldiers, sailors and one or two airmen; I saw Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, Scotsmen and Englishmen. I saw St Pauls Cathedral and joined one evening in Evensong. I saw the Embankment; I walked across the Tower Bridge and I saw Westminster Cathedral. I saw only from the outside the Museum which was closed and sand-bagged against danger from bombs. Once I travelled by train to an Australian Army Camp at Salisbury Plains and found an old Australian friend; we had a meal of eggs and ham at a little farmhouse near by. After each of these expeditions I would wearily return aboard "Wiltshire" at Tilbury and crawl into my bunk sometimes without a late meal. Excepting ~~one~~ one night when I slept in a back-alley rooming house suggested to me by a London policeman, I always slept in the ship. Nobody was supposed to be aboard the ship excepting duty personnel and cargo handlers yet nobody ever queried my movement on or off the ship. I did, of course as everyone else did, produce my pass at the dock gates.

Finally the ship was unloaded and we were ready to return once more to Australia. The second wireless man never rejoined the ship after his illness with the result that, during the voyage back to Australia the senior man and I kept 6-hours watches but in this there was some compensation for me; I was paid an additional 10/- per week and rated as second operator.

The ship was travelling in ballast and with but a dozen or so wounded Australians as passengers. In the Bay of Biscay we ran into bad weather. One of the lifeboats broke adrift and the watch on deck was sent to secure the boat. During one particularly violent lurch of the ship three of the crew went over the side. Two men were very fortunate in that, as they fell into the water, a wave washed them back onto the main deck, shaken but alive. The third unfortunate man was never seen again.

It was at Colombo, where leave was not granted, that our Captain said to me just after we had dropped anchor: "Stevens, I'll pay you an extra pound per week if you will be Assistant Purser. I'm now going ashore to the Office; come with me." When we reached the Office the Old Man took from me the brief case I had carried for him, handed to me an imposing "Pass" that would clear me through the dock police and said "Now clear out and meet me at the ferry at 2 o'clock sharp", and as an apparent after thought "Here is a pound note for expenses." I hired myself a Gharry pulled by a native of Colombo and visited the Cinnamon Gardens where I collected as a souvenir a twig from a cinnamon tree which twig, after some 45 years I still have. In due course I met the old man as directed and was told to hold the Pass until he asked for its return, which he never did. That Pass ensured my clearance ashore or aboard again, whatever were the shore leave arrangements for the remainder of the ship's company, during the remainder of my service in "Wiltshire".

Coal at Colombo was brought aboard the ship from lighters, in small baskets, carried on the heads of many natives. From a distance the stream of natives, up one single plank and down another gave a distinct appearance of an ant's nest. Day and night coaling proceeded but all too soon, once more, we were at sea, now heading for the Red Sea and the Suez Canal.

I had been lead to believe that the Red Sea was always dangerously hot. Certainly one would not have said that the weather was cool; on the other hand, however, wearing tropical kit as we did, there was some pleasure to be gained from the bright sunshine. Working as the two wireless officers were, 6 hours on and 6 hours off, one was usually sufficiently tired to sleep through at least one full watch below.

We spent very little time^{at} Suez. There was time, however, for mail to be collected from the Office and to post mail written during the voyage. At Suez I received a letter written by my family in Melbourne and which had been following our ship for months; there was barely a clear space on either side of the envelope which had been re-addressed nine times.

At Suez there was fitted over the bows of the ship a searchlight that would be used at night as we travelled along the Suez Canal. Twice we stopped to allow a southbound steamer to pass us; twice we passed an Australian Army camp close to the eastern bank of the Canal and on these occasions there was much shouting and cheering particularly when our fifty or more Nursing Sisters lined the ship's rail and waved to the "boys" ashore.

The ship was soon cleared of Army personnel when we arrived at Port Said. No doubt some of the Army "boys" found their ways to forward lines; no doubt some of the Sisters found their way to the privations and hardships of field hospitals. Perhaps some were lucky and were sent to Convalescent Camps. As ships that pass in the night so did we - we of the R.A.N. and they of the Army - meet, greet, and pass from each the others ken for all time.

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